

# The magnificence of Sikh architecture



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Inspired by Guru Nanak's creative mysticism, Sikh architecture is a mute harbinger of holistic humanism based on pragmatic spirituality, says S.S. Bhatti

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SO little has been written about Sikh architecture that it is difficult for anyone to believe that such a style of architecture exists at all. It is ironic that whereas the Sikhs are known the world over for their characteristic vigour, valour, versatility — above all, their distinct physical, moral and spiritual identity — their architecture should have remained so abjectly unidentified.



Apart from buildings of a religious order, Sikh architecture has secular building-types such as forts, palaces, bungas (residential places), colleges, etc. The religious structure is the gurdwara, a place where the Guru dwells. A gurdwara is not only the all-important building of the faith, as masjid or mosque of the Islam and mandir or temple of the Hindus, it is also, like its Islamic and Hindu counterparts, the key-note of Sikh architecture

The word 'gurdwara' is compounded of Guru (spiritual guide or master) and Dwara (gateway or seat) and, therefore, has an architectural connotation. Sikh temples are by and large commemorative buildings connected with the 10 Gurus in some way, or with places and events of historical significance. For example, Gurdwara Dera (halting place) Sahib in Batala in Gurdaspur district was erected to commemorate the brief stay there of Guru Nanak, along with the party, on the occasion of his marriage, Gurdwara Sheesh Mahal (hall of mirrors) in Kiratpur in Ropar district was built where the eighth Guru, Harkishan, was born, and so on. Gurdwara Shaheed Ganj (martyrs' memorial) in Muktsar in Faridkot district commemorates the place where the bodies of the Sikhs, who were killed in the battle fought between Guru Gobind Singh and the Mughal forces in 1705 AD, were cremated, Gurdwara Ram Sar (God's pool) in Amritsar stands on a site where the fifth Guru, Arjan Dev, compiled the Adi Granth, the Sikh Bible, with Bhai Gurdas, his maternal uncle, acting as the amanuensis.





The main requirement of a gurdwara is that of a room in which the Adi Granth, the Holy Book, can be placed and a small sangat (congregation) can be seated to listen to the path or readings from the Holy Book and to sing and recite the sacred verses. Gurdwaras have entrances on all the (four) sides signifying that they are open to one and all without any discrimination whatsoever. This distinguishing feature also symbolises the essential tenet of the faith that God is omnipresent. In some cases, however, space restriction does not permit entry from all the four sides, as in Gurdwara Sis Ganj in Delhi.

Many Sikh temples have a deorhi, an entrance gateway, through which one has to pass before reaching the shrine. A deorhi is often an impressive structure with an imposing gateway, and sometimes provides accommodation for office and other uses. The visitors get the first glimpse of the sanctum sanctorum from the deorhi. There are over 500 gurdwaras, big and small, which have an historical past.

The buildings of Sikh shrines, when classified according to their plan-form, are of four basic types: the square, the rectangular, the octagonal, and the cruciform. On the basis of the number of storeys, gurdwaras have elevations which may be one, two, three, five, or nine-storey high. One comes across several interesting variations of gurdwara-design worked out on the permutations and combinations of the aforesaid basic plan and elevation-types.

The following examples should suffice to illustrate the above categories. Darbar Sahib at Dera Baba Nanak in Gurdaspur district is constructed on a square plan and is a single-storey structure. Gurdwara Shaheed Ganj at Muktsar in Faridkot district has one storey built on a rectangular plan. Examples of this plan-shape are extremely rare. Gurdwara Loh Garh in Anandpur Sahib in Ropar district has an octagonal plan and a single-storey elevation. Gurdwara Tamboo (tent) Sahib in

Muktsar is a two-storey building constructed on a square plan, on a raised basement.

Gurdwara Chobara (room-on-terrace) Sahib at Goindwal in Amritsar district is a three-storey structure elevated on a square plan. Gurdwara Tham (pillar) Sahib at Kartarpur in Jalandhar district has square plan and five-storey elevation. Gurdwara Shaheedan (martyrs) in Amritsar was originally built as a three-storey octagonal structure. Gurdwara Baba Atal (immutable) in Amritsar, basically a smadh (cenotaph) purported to have been raised in memory of Baba Atal, the revered son of the sixth Guru, Har Gobind is a nine-storey building standing on an octagonal plan. It reminds one of Firoze Minar in Gaur.

Gurdwara Dera Baba Gurditta at Kiratpur in Ropar district is a square structure placed on a high plinth which has a ten-side plan. This polygonal plan-shape is quite unusual. Baolis (stepped wells) are also not uncommon in Sikh architecture. Gurdwara Baoli Sahib at Goindwal in Amritsar district is a representative example of such structures which belong to the miscellaneous class. Gurdwara Nanak Jheera in Bidar in Karnataka stands on a cruciform plan.





There are five historical shrines which have been given the status of takhts (thrones), where the gurmattas (spiritual-temporal decisions) of a binding character are taken through a consensus of the sangat (congregation). Such consensus edicts had great importance, affecting, as they did, the social and political life of the Sikh community. The five takhts are : Akal Takht, Amritsar; Harmandir Sahib, Patna (Bihar state); Kesgarh Sahib, Anandpur (Ropar district); Damdama Sahib, Talwandi Sabo (Gurdaspur district); and Hazoor Sahib, Nanded (Maharashtra state). Among these five takhts, Akal Takht (the immutable throne) is the most important by virtue of its location in Amritsar, the Vatican City of the Sikhs.



As a rule, a gumbad (dome) is the crowning feature of a gurdwara. Rarely, a shrine may be flat-roofed, as in the case of Gurdwara Guru-ka-Lahore near Anandpur Sahib in Ropar district. Sometimes, a small one-room shrine is topped by a palaki, a palanquin-like roof, derived from Bengal regional style of architecture, as can be seen in Gurdwara Tahli Sahib in village Tahla in Bathinda district. Gurdwara Bahadurgarh in Patiala district has a palaki instead of a dome as its crowning feature.

More often than not, a dome is fluted or ribbed but a plain dome has also been used in some cases, as in Manji Sahib at Damdama Sahib in Bathinda district. Several dome-shapes are to be found in Sikh shrines: torus, hemi-spherical, three-quarters of a sphere, etc. although the last-mentioned is more frequently used. The shape of the dome of Gurdwara Pataal Puri at Kiratpur in Ropar district has a remarkable likeness to the domes to be seen in Bijapur provincial style of architecture.

The dome is usually white, though sometimes gilded, as in the Golden Temple at Amritsar, Darbar Sahib at Tarn Taran, and Sis Ganj in Delhi. Alternatively, in some cases, domes have been covered with brass. Usually, domes on Sikh shrines spring from a floral base, and have inverted lotus-symbol-top from which rises the kalasa. Based on Mount Kailasa, held sacred in Hindu mythology, the kalasa shoots up in the form of a cylindrical construction, often with some concentric discs, spheroids,

culminating in a small canopy with pendants dangling at the outer rim.

An interesting point to note is the manner in which the dome is related to the cuboid structure of the shrine. As a rule, the lower part dominates the domical structure, and looks somewhat austere in comparison with it.

Apart from the large central dome, there are often four other smaller cupolas, one on each corner of the usually-cuboid structure of the shrine. The parapet may be embellished with several turrets, or small rudimentary domes, or crenellations, or replicas of arcades with domical toppings, or strings of guldastas (bouquets), or similar other embellishments. Minarets — the ubiquitous symbols of Mughal architecture-- are rarely seen in a gurdwara. An exception is Gurdwara Katalgarh (place of execution) at Chamkaur Sahib in Ropar district which has several minarets.

A recurrent element of gurdwara-design is the preferred use of two storeys to gain sufficient elevation for the shrine. However restrained the design may be, the elevation is usually treated by dividing the facade in accordance with the structural lines of columns, piers, and pilasters, with vertical divisions creating areas of well-modelled surfaces. The most important division is,

of course, the entrance which receives more ornate treatment than other areas. The treatment often creates bas-reliefs of geometrical, floral, and other designs. Where magnificence is the aim, repousse-work in brass or copper-gilt sheeting is introduced often with a note of extravagance.

Jaratkari, intricate in-lay work, gach, plaster-of-Paris work, tukri work, fresco-painting, pinjra (lattice work) are the techniques used for the embellishment of exterior surfaces as well as for interior decoration. Jaratkari is both a very expensive and time-consuming technique of studding semi-precious and coloured stones into marbles slabs. The slabs often have florid or geometrical borders which enclose painstakingly executed in-lay work using floral shapes and patterns. Beautiful designs are made on the walls with gach which is subsequently gilded. Excellent examples of this work can be seen in the Golden Temple at Amritsar. Sometimes, the gach-work is rendered highly ornamental by means of coloured and mirrored cut-glass as well as semi-precious stones. This is called tukri (small piece) work. Frescoes, depicting popular episodes from the lives of the ten Gurus, are to be found in some shrines. Designs employed are based on vine, plant, flower, bird, and animal motifs. The largest number of such frescoes have been painted on the first floor of Baba Atal at Amritsar. Pinjras, delicate stone grills, are used for screens, enclosures, and parapets.





Brick, lime mortar as well as lime or gypsum plaster, and lime concrete have been the most favoured building materials, although stone, such as red sandstone and white marble, has also been used in a number of shrines. The latter found use more as cladding or decorative material than for meeting structural needs for well over two hundred years. Nanak Shahi (of the times of Nanak) brick was most commonly used for its intrinsic advantages. It was a kind of brick-tile of moderate dimensions used for reinforcing lime concrete in the structural walls and other components which were generally very thick. The brick-tile made mouldings, cornices, pilasters, etc. easy to work into a variety of shapes. More often than not, the structure was a combination of the two systems, viz., trabeated, or post-and-lintel, and arcuated, based on vaults and arches. The surfaces were treated with lime or gypsum plaster which was moulded

into cornices, pilasters, and other structural features as well as non-structural embellishments.

Sikh architecture represents the last flicker of religious architecture in India. The Golden Temple at Amritsar is its most celebrated example as this is the only monument in which all the characteristics of the style are fully represented. Golden Temple, being the sheet-anchor of the stylistic index of Sikh architecture, may be detailed.

Almost levitating above, and in the middle of, an expansive water-body, the "Pool of Nectar" (Amrit-Sar), the Darbar (court) Sahib, or Harmandir (Lord's Temple), as it is called, stirs one deeply with glitters of its golden dome, kiosks, parapets, and repousse-work, and the enchanting evanescence of its shimmering reflections in the pool. With the temple and tank as the focus, a complex of buildings, most of which repeat in their architectural details and the characteristics of the central structure, have come up in the vicinity of the shrine in the course of time.

Although Sikh architecture undoubtedly originated with the idea of devotion, it had to undergo rigours of compulsively transforming itself into buildings meant for defence purposes. It assumed the character of military fortification which was

reflected in a number of buildings throughout Punjab. Gurdwara Baba Gurditta, Kiratpur, is a representative example of this type of Sikh architecture.

As a style of building-design, Sikh architecture might strike the lay onlooker as eclectic : a pot-pourri of the best features picked up from here and there. But it embodies much more than meets the casual eye. It shares its stringent regulation with the awesome austerity of Islam's uncompromising monotheism. And celebrates its lush exuberance with the playful polytheism of Hinduism. Eclecticism might have been its starting-point, but Sikh architecture has flourished to a state of artistic autonomy so as to work out its own stylistic idiosyncrasies. It is now an apt expression of spontaneous outbursts of psycho-spiritual energy that celebrates the immaculate majesty of Being within the churning melange of opposites encountered during workaday existence -- the arena for continual becoming. Inspired by Guru Nanak's creative mysticism, Sikh architecture is a mute harbinger of holistic humanism based on pragmatic spirituality.

Sikh architecture reflects a lively blend of Mughal and Rajput styles. Onion-shaped domes, multi-foil arches, paired pilasters, in-lay work frescoes, etc. are doubtless of Mughal extraction, more specifically of Emperor-Architect Shah Jehan's period, while oriel windows, bracket-supported eaves at the string-course, chhatris, richly-ornamented friezes, etc. are



reminiscent of elements of Rajput architecture such as is seen in Jaipur, Jodhpur, Bikaner, and other places in Rajasthan.

Use of water as an element of design has been frequently exploited in Mughal and Hindu architecture, but nowhere in so lively a manner as in Sikh architecture. Water becomes a sine qua non of Sikh building-design, as in the Golden Temple at Amritsar, or Darbar Sahib at Tarn Taran, and not merely an appendage to the main shrine. The gurdwara is placed lower down than the structures in the vicinity, unlike a masjid or a mandir which are usually placed on raised platforms.

While sticking to the same basic requirements, different Sikh shrines have developed their own characteristic expressions. It may be recalled that most of the gurdwaras are commemorative buildings, and therefore the sites, on which they have been built, had the intrinsic challenges and advantages which were more fortuitous than premeditated. Most situations have been handled with remarkable imagination and ingenuity. Eventually, no two shrines look exactly alike although there are exceptions such as Dera Sahib in Lahore, and Panja (Palm-impression) Sahib, both in Pakistan. Also, the low metal-gilt fluted dome of the Golden Temple has been copied in these two shrines as well as in the Darbar Sahib at Tarn Taran.

Sometimes, the difference in design is so great that it would be difficult to recognise a gurdwara if the standard Sikh pole-mark or Nishan Sahib were not there to help its identification. Some of the gurdwaras look more like gateways, as is the case with Fatehgarh (town of victory) Sahib, Sirhind, or like an educational institution, as is the case with Ber (berry) Sahib, Sultanpur Lodhi, or like a Rajput palace, as is the case with Gurdwara Bahadurgarh (fort of the valiant) in Patiala district, when one first encounters the shrine's enclosing structures. But all this deviation, if somewhat baffling, does not detract one from the essentials of Sikh architecture. On the contrary it substantiates the very basis of creative freedom on which it is built.

It may be mentioned that two of the historic examples of Sikh architecture were designed by late Sardar Balwant Singh Bhatti (a selfmade man of many parts). They were Panja Sahib (Hasan Abdal) now in Pakistan, and Takht Sri Kesgarh, Anandpur Sahib.

Among the secular buildings of Sikh architecture, Khalsa College at Amritsar is the most outstanding example. Designed by Sardar Bahadur Sardar Ram Singh, a self-taught genius of prodigious dimensions, this institution is unsurpassed for its architectural conception, quiet nobility, and ambient exuberance. Ram Singh was conferred the coveted title of MVO (Member of the Victorian Order). The Queen of England had

unqualified admiration for this Sardar's many-splendoured creativity.

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